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When to Read Was to Write

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The ideal reader is all mind. Swept up in a virtual universe, she no longer notices hunger, heat, or cold; losing all sense of time, he ends up losing his senses. Real readers are different. They need eyes to see the page and hands to turn it. Some lick their thumbs; others (like Sheridan's Lady Slattern in 1775) "cherish their nails for the purpose of making marginal notes." This real reader's body leaves distracting, even disgusting residues. Andrew Lang reports in 1900:

The thick double-columned volume in which I peruse the works of [Ann Radcliffe] belongs to a public library. It is quite the dirtiest, greasiest, most dog's-eared, and most bescribbled tome in the collection. Many of the books have remained, during the last hundred years, uncut, even to this day, and I have had to apply the paper knife to many an author, from Alciphron (1790) to Mr. Max Muller, and Dr. Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boszzy's 'Life of Dr. Johnson.' But Mrs. Radcliffe has been read diligently, and copiously annotated.

Lang was typical in situating this battle of the books in the library. As the historian Armando Petrucci has shown, the rise of the public library meant the fall of the reader's body: under the librarian's eye, tables can support only books, not feet; dust jackets are encased in sterile plastic covers. In rare book rooms like those where Used Books was researched, bags are searched for food, pens are confiscated, hands are gloved. And as H.J. Jackson pointed out in the standard study of marginalia (Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001]), the growing number of "career library books" that pass from cradle to grave in reading rooms from which drink or even ink is excluded leave us with a thinner record of reader-response. The research for William Sherman's Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England was conducted in the Cambridge University Library, where every desk bears a "Marking of Books is Forbidden" sign, many of them imaginatively defaced. Working there around the same time, the surface I reread most regularly was the wall of the women's toilets on which some earlier scholar had expanded "UL" to "underwater lycra."

Today, inscribing any medium other than the blank page – whether a toilet wall or a printed book – is as forbidden as whistling in the reading-room. Our taboo on graffiti reflects characteristically modern ideologies of consumer cleanliness and bodily self-control (155). The taboo on marginalia, though, more specifically reflects a new model of reading. Our culture celebrates receptivity, the willingness to be marked by texts; in early modern England, though, this would have looked more like passivity, the failure to make a mark. In the world that Sherman describes, readers were not just permitted but expected to annotate. Far from teaching children the self-restraint needed to keep their grubby hands off of desks and textbooks, schoolmasters taught them elaborate notational systems for use in the margins.

To read implied to write. Measured in word-counts, marginalia often dwarf the host to which they play parasite. One extant copy of a 1500 edition of Aristotle's

Posterior Analytics crams 59,600 words of annotation into 68 pages; one 1516 Bible averaged 12,00 manuscript words per page (xii). As the literary critic Heidi Brayman Hackel found when she went through 150 copies of Sidney's Arcadia, almost three-quarters of them contained readers' marks. This is not to say that they contained what we would recognize as "marginalia," however. "Pens are not the only objects that have left impressions in these books; pressed flowers survive in two volumes, and the rust outlines of pairs of scissors [in] two other copies" (qtd. 10).

Those rust stains should remind scholars not to get their hopes up: the ubiquity of reader's marks doesn't guarantee a record of reader-response. In an age of expensive paper, notes did not necessarily comment on the printed text alongside which they ran: the margins also provided a handy writing surface for unrelated "penmanship exercises, prayers, recipes, popular poetry, drafts of letters, mathematical calculations, [and] shopping lists" (15). It's unsurprising that everyday genres like almanacs are especially rich in these kinds of jotting; what does come as a shock, though, is to stumble (as Sherman did) upon a recipe for leek sauce scrawled on a page of Boccaccio's Amorous Fiammetta (16). As every schoolchild who's ever caricatured his teacher on the flyleaf of a textbook knows, marginalia can signal distraction as easily as absorption: in another scholar's taxonomy of marginal notes, subcategories include "censorship," "doodling," and "daydreaming" (16). Conversely, the most impassioned reading covers its own tracks. The greater a reader's engagement with the text, the less likely she is to pause long enough to leave a record: if an uncut page signals withdrawal, a blank margin just as often betrays an absorption too rapt for note-taking.

Marginalia appeal to scholars' voyeurism, letting them peer over a past reader's shoulder. But the metaphor of eavesdropping works better for the Romantic-era margins studied by Jackson than for Sherman's period, because Renaissance readers didn't yet understand their markings as private. Annotation was performative, not solipsistic; symbols were conventional, not cryptic. The stubborn refusal of early modern marginalia to yield up the confessions that twenty-first-century scholars are looking for reflects a radically different conception of the self and the body. Many of the scholars who turn to marginalia in the hope of finding a record of reader response inhabit English departments, yet early modern literary texts (as Sherman establishes) were much less heavily annotated than legal and religious ones. And as those scissor marks suggest, traces of reading are rarer than traces of handling.

Like other recent scholars of the book -- notably Carla Mazzio and Bradin Cormack in their eponymous Book Use -- Sherman replaces "reading" by the more capacious term "use." This rebranding is more than just a digitally-inspired euphemism. To think in terms of "use" is to demote reading to only one in a long lists of things that people can do to books and with books, including searching, owning, signing, repairing, and displaying. Some of these activities (the ones on which Sherman's analysis lingers) are verbal; others are purely manual. As a result, Sherman acknowledges, marginalia are not the monopoly of literary critics like himself: other disciplines, notably archaeology, have developed more sophisticated tools with which to study material culture.

Reception history never stands above opportunism. Articulate, relevant, informative marginalia are hard to come by; in their absence, one has to fall back on non-verbal evidence. At best, deliberate underlining with a pen or a fingernail; more often,

unintentional smudges and stains. For every ink mark, ten drink spills; for every trace of tears or semen, ten of wax or smoke. If book historians have gravitated toward tearjerkers and pornography, it may be because both produce a measurable somatic response. Scholars from various disciplines share the urge to match a mental process with material measurements: as long ago as 1988, Victor Nell's Lost in a Book documented a Clockwork-Orange-style study measuring readers' response through salivation rates, cardiovascular rhythms, and electrogastrograms. More recently, cognitive scientists have turned their attention to reading (Maryanne Wolf's Proust and the Squid (2007)), and literary critics to cognitive science (Lisa Zunshine's Why we Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel (2006)). But marginalia got there first. No less than an electrocardiogram, underscorings provide a permanent record of fleeting responses.

The pen marks in my own copy of Used Books cluster in its second chapter, "Toward a History of the Manicule." Littering the margins of early modern books, these pointing fingers call our attention to lines and paragraphs: "some of these hands are printed and some handwritten; some are clothed in the simplest of sleeves and others emerge from billowing cuffs with pendant jewels; some suggest the merest outline of a hand while other capture the sinews, joints, and even nails" (29). As Sherman wittily shows, these hands are the closest thing annotators had to a visual signature. Modern readers' handwriting is distinctive but their symbols standardized; in the Renaissance, the reverse was true. Handwriting was doubly unrecognizable, given that an individual could use multiple "hands" for different purposes over the course of a single lifetime and that each would ideally follow a standard model regardless of the writer. Manicules, however, bear the impress of particular personalities, from the long fingernails in one set of marginalia to the elaborate ruffs surrounding the wrists in another (52).

Some manicules stretch (trompe-l'oeil-style) to the edge of the page, uncannily simulating a dead reader's hand reaching into our field of vision, "almost like a comic version of the hand of God coming down from the clouds" (37). These marginalia don't just look like the hand of God, though: they also look like a cursor. In the late 1970s, the Xerox Star pioneered the cursor in the form of a hand-shaped icon; in 1981, the phrase "direct manipulation" was coined to describe the computer interface that we now call "point and click." Sherman puts the digits back into the digital age, arguing that its verbal and visual metaphors derive from the long tradition of hands that mark books and "manicules" marked in them. Sherman's point is larger than his slightly dated puns suggest: far from a disembodied meeting of minds, Renaissance thinkers imagined reading as a corporeal act, in which the hand played as much of a role as the mind. To "mark" (as in "mark my words") meant "to leave a trace on the page" before it ever came to refer to the mental action of noticing and remembering.

Ambivalence about readers' marks surfaces most visibly in the contemporary book trade. As Jackson argued, marginalia can add to the value of a book (if they happen to be attributed a famous person) or detract from it (if they belong to some anonymous highlighter-wielding student). In fact, Sherman points out, the same copy of a sixteenth-century book can be described (in a 1952 sale catalogue) as "rather soiled by use" and (in a 1953 exhibition catalogue) as "well and piously used," with "marginal notations in an Elizabethan hand" that "bring to life an early and earnest owner" (151). Some binders,

collectors, and book dealers try to restore books to their original state: stains, smudges, and even marginalia can be bathed in bleach; old covers and endpapers are routinely scrapped by binders, while margins can be trimmed off altogether (163). If you take seriously the metaphor of the "virgin copy," these operations would bear some resemblance to the back-alley surgical procedures that promise to reconstruct the hymen.

Now that libraries catalogue books as either "manuscript" or "printed," marginalia can slip between the cracks (56). In the period that Sherman describes, the boundary was more porous. Some readers, he concludes, distinguished between big and small printed books more sharply than they did between printed books and manuscripts (20). Manuscripts copied printed books and printed books modelled themselves after manuscript templates (94) -- rather as, today, digital interfaces borrow concepts like the "folder" and the "recycling bin." This interplay of reading with writing makes sense in an era when readers took responsibility for customizing their books. Even after the invention of printing, finding aids like tables of contents and indexes were added by individuals, by hand. And as long as loose sheets were bound by their end users, readers could interleave blank pages, rearrange sections, or even combine sections from different volumes (9). In an age when the printed page was a starting-place, not an endpoint, marginalia formed only one of a series of tools that readers -- and owners -- could use to personalize their libraries.

The future of such tools forms the end-point of Used Books. Publishers' catalogues in the past few years have been flooded with titles in the form "[adjective referring to a historical period] + [noun referring to a later invention]": thus, an account of telegraphy dubbed The Victorian Internet, or the book-historical essays gathered under the title of The Renaissance Computer. Sherman throws his hat into the overcrowded ring with a chapter on commonplace-books called "Sir Julius Caesar's Search Engine," but his speculations on the post-Renaissance computer remain inconclusive. Although electronic text is often described in the language of "interactivity," Sherman claims, on-line databases erase the reader's tracks: unlike paper, they preserve neither bodily marks nor readerly commentary. If that were true, computers would stand at the end of the cartesian trajectory that I've just described: the separation of hardware from software makes one reader's body invisible to another. But marketers have never lacked a vested interest in tracking the eyes and thumbs of online readers, since the number of click-throughs determines the value of advertising placement. Offline, the latest version of Adobe Acrobat allows readers to add underlinings and marginalia to PDFs; and even Amazon's stripped-down e-reader, the Kindle, supports marginal annotation. And online, social networking sites promise to make reading more interactive, not less. Wikalong, a new plugin for the Firefox browser, makes it possible to add notes to the margin of a web page.¹ Sites like <http://del.icio.us/> and <http://www.furl.net/> enable individuals to label websites with keywords of their own devising, and to search for sites tagged by other users; the resulting lists function something like the hand-made indexes that Sherman describes on the endpapers of Renaissance books.

"Social tagging" doesn't just return us to a culture in which reading is punctuated by writing; it also restores a Preromantic sense of reading as communal or even collaborative. The tools available at BookGlutton.com include "proximity chat," which allows readers to respond to the comments of other readers who have reached the same point in the text. This addresses an age-old problem in the reviewing of narrative fiction:

how to avoid giving the plot away. But it also reflects an understanding of reading as a process unfolding in time, not just a product to be reported on once completed. On Amazon.com no less than in the LRB, etiquette dictates -- in theory, at least -- that reviewers wait until finishing a book to make their reactions public. In contrast, BookGlutton recreates the sense of real-time discovery that past readers' marginalia also offers.

None of this is to say that anyone has figured out where the virtual margin lies: standards for online annotation remain the subject of lively debate.² What does seem clear, though, is that the Web won't change whether readers deposit traces of their responses, but how. Perhaps eavesdropping will give way to broadcasting. Perhaps the highlighter-wielding sociopath will give way to the sociable (or exhibitionistic) citizen of Web 2.0. Perhaps blogs will be swamped by tangentially relevant comments and counter-comments whose volume dwarfs the posting to which they nominally respond. Perhaps our future, no less than our past, will be framed by cluttered margins.

1. http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2005/05/web_marginalia.html

2. See, e.g., <http://www.teleread.org/blog/2007/12/21/be-my-pal-call-for-annotationlinking-open-standard/>.